

# VARIATION ON A THEMIE

It takes vision and restraint to successfully pull off a theme vehicle. The Marathon Manx worked, and you could choose the next one...

Words: Mike Pye Photos: Lyndon McNeil



The key to 'theme' vehicles of any sort is knowing when to stop. All too often they end up looking like a Christmas tree as more and more parts are added to conform to the chosen theme, but do it right and you can pull off a concept that others might at first dismiss as they don't share your vision. That was undoubtedly the case when Mark Dryden at Flatlands Engineering said he was thinking about building a theme Buggy. "I'd had this flame flickering around in my head to do a theme car – not an Orange County Choppers kind of theme, mind, but something based on one of the special edition Beetles." But which one? There have been dozens of such Beetles offered by VW dealers around the world over the years, and some were definitely more successful than others. Many were simply a bright colour and perhaps a sticker or two, which might well suit a Buggy, but with stock steel wheels they could look a little dull. So it needed to be one that had something more exciting, and more instantly recognisable, in the wheel department. A gelb-schwarzer Renner (yellow and black racer) perhaps? Or a GT? Or one of the dealer options such as a Mach 1 or an EMPI GTV? In the end, the answer was staring him in the face. "I had this chap turn up one day with a '70's Beetle he wanted me

to restore. It was so rotten I ended up telling him it wasn't worth doing," Mark recalls. To cut a long story short, the guy accepted Mark's appraisal and ended up leaving the car with him to dispose of, rather than trailer it to a scrapyards. It yielded a set of gnarly Marathon Beetle wheels, which ended up cluttering Mark's workshop for the next couple of years. Every so often, Mark's mind wandered back to the theme idea, until one day it hit him. "I had an old East Coast Manx body sitting around from a car I'd built to take my daughter to her prom when she was 16, I had the Marathon wheels and, well, you know what I'm like with my light metallic blues... Basically, it's just a nice colour... and I had a set of wheels," he laughs. And so the Marathon Buggy was born.

## Special sauce

The L96M colour was a given, but that and the wheels alone wasn't going to be enough to pull the concept off. Mark knew he'd have to add some of his special Flatlands Engineering sauce into the mix so, while the body was with Steve 'not now' Cato Restorations in nearby Tottenham and his son, Dean, was busy assembling a floorpan, he set his mind to, as he put it, dithering about with the details.

"I wanted it to be subtle, and it had to look seventies, not sixties – that was crucial. But we looked at some seventies Beetles and they didn't have any details. I'd never built a Buggy with a late steering column before,

though, so I started looking at ways we could modify that." Reducing the diameter of a late model steering wheel might not have been the first idea that came into your head, but it did Mark's, so he set to and cut the rim off a stock wheel. "Not one of my most intelligent ideas," he remembers, with a grin, "that was a real ballache to do, and I wasn't even sure it would work until I'd done it." But he persevered, having a piece of steel tube machine rolled in a 13.5-inch diameter circle and welding that back to the cut-down spokes. The diameter, incidentally, was governed by the size of the horn push section, which just so happened to be about spot on for a Buggy. "We then discovered that on a stock Beetle, the collapsible section is slightly off centre, which must be to line the steering wheel up with the seating position and the dash." That's fine on a Beetle, but it looked all wrong on a Buggy, so that had to be cut and modified and TIG welded back together again, while at the same time being kept factory length so the plastic cowling fitted around it. It was only once Chris Lyons at Trimming Tonic had leather wrapped it that Mark and Dean could see the end result of their significant endeavours. "I think it came out okay in the end," he says, modestly.

If you didn't notice that when you saw the car at the *VolksWorld* Show, the chances are you won't have noticed the speaker grilles in the dash either. Thought at first glance they look stock, albeit upside down, they're actually laser cut one-offs, subtly re-shaped to suit the contours of the dash and with a tighter inner radius to wrap around the stock '70's speedo that on a Buggy is fitted without the bezel. Tiny details, but crucial to the overall look. One of the benefits of using the late steering

▼ Original Marathon wheels were re-made in 6 and 8.5-inch widths to suit the Buggy and roll in 205/60 and 275/60 BF Goodrich Radials.

column was its integral indicator, main beam and wiper functions, though Al the sparky sneaked a micro switch in there so the washers now function electrically, rather than via air from the spare wheel. That just left the main headlight switch to locate, which is under the dash to the right of the wheel.

### Third degree burns

With minimal trim in a Buggy, there wasn't much more that could be done inside, even if Mark had wanted to. The choice of material for the seats, though, was obvious – it had to be '70's basket weave – you know, that black plastic that super heats if left out in the sun, so you weld the back of your legs to the seats when you get in the car in shorts. Which also happens to be what Marathon Beetles were trimmed out with. Aside from the potential for third degree burns, it was a brilliant idea.

"It was such a simple project. You couldn't really do any more. You could have scrawled Marathon down the sidepods, but we don't do shit like that. Yet everybody seemed to get it."

Mark's obviously playing down his eye for getting things right here, as what really makes the car is the wheels. The Lemmerz sports wheels that were fitted to Marathon Beetles



Like all Flatland's Buggies, this one drives as well as it looks. And doesn't it look well out on the road?



**"Basically, it's just a nice colour... and I had a set of wheels"**

East Coast Manx hood has been subtly modified to make it look the way it does now, and appears to float above the rear body kick-ups.

Seats are Buggy buckets with the rolled bolsters taken out of their leading edges to look more like '70's Beetle seats. Shifter is a 11.5in Vintage Speed Classic, and even the seat belts are '70's-style inertia reel.



### You choose the theme

One glance at the Special Edition Beetle website ([www.sebeetles.com](http://www.sebeetles.com)) and you'll see there were literally dozens of variations on the basic Beetle offered over the years.

As this Buggy has now been sold – to Southern Dune Buggy Club member, Mel Baker – Flatlands Engineering has come up with an idea for the next *VolksWorld* Show. You choose a theme for the Buggy and they'll build it for next year's show. Send your ideas in to us here at *VolksWorld*, or email them to [volksworld@ipcmedia.com](mailto:volksworld@ipcmedia.com). We'll do the easy bit and choose the best one, Flatlands will do the hard work and build it. Then you'll get to see your idea brought to life at Sandown Park 2013.



**"Not one of my most intelligent ideas"**



Rear cage that surrounds the Kadron-equipped 1641 is actually a long wheelbase Manxster cage, but with a new, drilled crossbar.



are a bit of a Marmite deal – people either love 'em or hate 'em – but they're instantly recognisable. However, at the stock 4.5J width they looked frankly ridiculous on the Buggy. No fear, Mark simply sent them off to his good buddy, Tony Jarvis at Chassiscraft, and had him re-make them in 6 and 8.5J widths, with just the perfect offset for the Manx wheel openings. I asked Mark how he decided what offsets to use and his answer was succinct: "Experience," but then followed that up with his thinking on the matter: "5.5s and a 195 on a Manx aren't quite enough – the tyre needs to just roll out of the arches a bit, but not poke out." My feelings exactly. "I probably spent more on the centre caps than I did on anything else on the car, but they had to be absolutely spot on," he continues. In the end, that good old boy, Owen Warlow, turned up three NOS caps and one really nice used one. "When I put them on, they just made the car."

The last thing to receive the Flatlands touch was the roof, which hunkers down over a 16-inch front screen. It's an East Coast Manx moulding, but is very different now to the standard item. "We retained the basic shape, but put it on a hell of a diet," explains Mark. "We cut the side panels right down and then made the ribbed trims they attach to so it just sort of hovers over the body." Even just those trims were a load of work – they're made up of several pieces, drilled and tapped with hidden captive bolts and then welded and ground off so they look more cast than machined. They've also been painted and polished to match the wheels and also pick up on the ribbed valve covers used on the engine.

**"the tyre needs to just roll out of the arches a bit, but not poke out"**

▲ In this shot you can just see the original Solex carbs and those cast finned valve covers, detailed to match the wheels and the hood trims.

Another thing you almost certainly won't have noticed is that the engine tinware isn't black at all, but a dark blue / grey, chosen specifically to work with the body colour.

The engine itself is a 1641cc unit with twin original Kadrons, chosen as Mark felt it suited the period of the car perfectly. What he didn't realise was that the flywheel had come loose at some point, so the simple freshen up – by Alex Bruce – turned into a full rebuild. Exemplary detailing is typical Flatlands, and that's true of the entire floorpan. "It's nothing special at all," says

Mark, meaning it's totally stock (okay, it's 14½ inches shorter than stock, but you know what I mean) but, typical of his attention to detail, it's the right vintage for a Marathon. We like that.

As we said at the beginning, it would have been easy to go too far with the theme on this Buggy, and Mark admits he had several ideas that ended up in the bin. He could have used the sidepods, or the rear cage brace to shout Marathon, but that sort of crass statement was unnecessary. He considered period correct tombstone rear lights, and even discussed making nudge bars that echoed late model bumpers, but thought better of it. "All the way through, I tried to stop myself," he says. As Ludwig Mies van der Rohe so succinctly put it, less is more. And he was dead right. **VW**



For comparison, a stock Marathon Beetle interior. Note the size of the steering wheel.



Shrunken wheel and laser cut dash grilles. How neat?

## Der Weltmeister

Marathon Beetles were built in 1972 to celebrate production of the Beetle officially overtaking that of the Ford Model T. That happened when production reached 15,007,034 and, while there can only be one 15,007,034th Beetle (a 1302S by the way), well over 6,000 Marathon, or World Champion, Beetles were made, and those sold in the UK were all 1300 or 1302 models, painted in L96M metallic silver / blue. They came equipped with silver and black painted Lemmertz steel wheels, with either silver or black plastic wheel nut covers and octagonal alloy push-in centre caps. If you bought one new, you also received a commemorative folder, entitled 'History in the making', a certificate, a keyring and a medallion, which read, 'Der Weltmeister [World Champion] 1972, Wolfsburg, Germany', alongside a side view of a Marathon Beetle.

Here's a stock 4.5J Lemmertz wheel for comparison. They actually came in two slightly different offsets, but the more common Beetle ones are ET34.

